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Narrative Obscurity in *La Casa Verde*

The first reaction of the logic-trained reader of *La Casa Verde* must be one of frustration as he or she faces the seemingly overwhelming task of making "sense" of the narrative details. Characters, action, space, and time are the basic elements which constitute a narrative reality, and as readers we probably prefer to experience these elements in chronological order. If the order is not chronological, we will try by force of habit or training to reorder the images to fit our preferred (chrono)logical perception—an effort we presume will lead us to understand the narrative in the terms of our own reality.

To be a reader of *La Casa Verde* is not an easy task. The narration is divided into four major chapters and an epilogue (designated UNO, DOS, etc.). After a preliminary narrative segment, each major chapter and the epilogue are further divided into three or four shorter narrative sections (designated I, II, etc.). Each of these sections is then further divided into four or five subsections designated only by a space. Within each section and subsection there is likely to be a complete disruption of what we know as logical time and spacial sequence, of character identity, and of language structure.

From the beginning we find ourselves directed by an erratic narrative voice. Omniscient at the start (first preliminary section), it jumps headlong into a group of characters with a quick, illogical sequence of action and conversation too fast for the usual sentence, paragraph or speaker breaks. Here we are presented several semi-nameless characters—military guards (el Sargento, Chiquito, el Pesado, el Rubio, el Oscuro), two Catholic nuns, a pilot (don Adrián Nieves), and some indigenous individuals under the tribal name Aguaruna. The location is the jungle. The action, we discover, is concentrated on the abduction of indigenous children. The time is not yet fixed except for referential clues: modern rifles, a motorboat, and the mention of airplanes over the jungle.

As soon as this omniscient section ends, the narrative voice begins to move aside intermittently throughout the next five subsections of (I) to allow us to overhear direct conversation among characters. In the first of the subsections, many of the characters are familiar to us from the previous action but now are in a different location—a settlement called Santa María de Nieva—with the governor (don Fabio), the mother superior, and a young woman named Bonifacia. The omniscient voice describes the setting: a town located at the junction of two rivers that run east down the Andes into the jungle, military outposts, mission buildings, the town square, houses of Christians, the Indian Quarter, a

commissary, and a bar. The conversation is about two female students who, with Bonifacia's help, have run away from the mission.

In the second subsection of (I), the narrator abruptly brings us into a conversation between two new characters, Fushía and Aquilino. The location is on the river Marañón (part of the Amazon system), and Fushía is sick. The omniscient narrator reveals background information and intermittently opens to conversation in flashback between Chango, Iricuo, and Japonecito (Fushía). The three escaped from a Brazilian jail, and Fushía alone reached Peru by way of the Amazon tributaries. Neither the actual time of the narration nor the time of the flashback conversation is made clear at this point. Aside from the geographical proximity to the previous action, there is yet no clue to the relationship between these characters and the guards, nuns, and indigenous of the former narrative sections.

The narrative voice then jumps to the third subsection which takes place in a town called Piura in Northeast Peru on the desert side of the Andes. The entire subsection is an omniscient description of the town and its culture—unnamed peasants, bandits, landowners, the doctor, the priest (Father García), merchants, lawyers, authorities, townspeople, legends, la Plaza de Armas, the hotel (Estrella del Norte), peripheral sections of Piura (Mangachería, Castilla, la Gallinacera), and the Green House ("noisy and frivolous, nocturnal"). This rich description of Piura and its surroundings is given to us without connection to the preceding narrative units (either action, geography, or characters) and without a specific time reference.

In the fourth subsection, the omniscient narrator takes us back to the Amazon area and one of the military posts. We are introduced to officers (el cabo) Roberto Delgado, (el capitán) Artemio Quiroga, and the pilot again (this time titled capitán) Adrián Nieves. The direct conversation beween Delgado and Captain Quiroga is woven into the omniscient narration and includes pejorative references to Delgado's indigenous origins. Still there is no connection made to times or action from the other narrative sections or to relationships with other characters.

In the last subsection of (I) the omniscient narrative voice jumps back to Piura-Mangachería and introduces several new characters: Josefino Rojas, José, los León, el Mono, and Lituma. The narration switches intermittently from omniscient to direct conversation. The action here is centered around Lituma's return from Lima, and clues are offered to other characters: Chunga, the harpist, and "her", and to past actions: for example, when the young men pass Father García on the street they exchange verbal insults, "impíos" and "quemador" respectively. Time references in this subsection also begin to offer clues: the avenue named for past Peruvian President Sánchez Cerro (1931–33), and changes in

Piura-Mangachería (a new bridge, Chinese food places, and whites who "now walk around as if they owned the place").

Throughout the following three sections and subsections of chapter UNO, the narrator repeats the same sequence of characters and locations: (a) the nuns and Bonifacia at the mission in Santa María de Nieva, (b) Fushía and Aquilino on the river with flashbacks to Fushía's part in illegal rubber trade, (c) Piura's past, the Green House, and don Anselmo, (d) political officials, military personnel, and businessmen—like Julio Reátegui—taking care of things from the outposts of Santa María, and (e) the young males—los inconquistables—in Piura-Mangachería with flashbacks to Chunga's bar, the harpist, and to Bonifacia (!).

This pattern, always introduced by an omniscient section of intermediary activity between businessmen, the military, the officials, the nuns, the outlaws, and the indigenous, is repeated three more times in chapter DOS, four times in TRES, three times in CUATRO (with a minor variation in TRES and CUATRO), and with single concluding episodes in the EPILOGO.

At some point in the process of putting together clues and "making sense" of the, in total, 72 narrative fragments, we begin to realize that there are not only two distinct geographical areas (the Amazon area and Piura-Mangachería), but also two historical time periods woven together—one that dates to the beginning of the 20th century and the years of rubber boom prosperity, and the other that focuses on the period after World War II. The time sequence within the narrative pattern starts with past in the preliminary sections and jumps from past to present with flashbacks to past to present and again to present with flashbacks—a pattern repeated 18 times throughout the subsections. The time span in any section may be 30 years or more, and the action may jump from Santa María to the vast Amazon network and to Piura-Mangachería.

This arrangement at first suggests at least two separate sets of action and characters, but as we proceed to track the clues revealed by the erratic narrative voice that link together the various sets of action, characters, times, and places, we discover that the activities which begin at two distinct time periods and in two distinct geographical areas—the capture of indigenous children, the training at the mission, the activities of the soldiers and guards, the river traffic (legal and illegal) in rubber and other merchandise, and the activities at the Casa Verde—are connected to each other all within the framework of a single story.

An important clue to this connection is discovered upon tracing the characters as they appear throughout the subsections—sometimes under different names. The character who provides the most constant link is

Bonifacia. She was one of the indigenous children abducted from the jungle in the first narrative fragment. She reappears at the mission as a student/helper with her new Christian name. At one point the nuns considered sending her with businessman Julio Reátegui to be a domestic employee in Iquitos. She was eventually expelled from the mission for helping two indigenous females escape and went to live with Adrián Nieves and Lalita (former mate of Fushía). She later married the Sergeant and went with him to Piura-Mangachería. He (now Lituma) was sent to prison in Lima, and Bonifacia (now la Selvática) became a prostitute at the Green House. The period immediately following his return ten years later provides the narrative base for the last subsection in each sequence of the pattern.

Another character whose activities connect several points in the narrative is Fushía, a Brazilian of Japanese origin, who escaped from prison to Peru where he got involved in an illegal wartime rubber trade operation with Julio Reátegui—then the governor in Santa María de Nieva. When the operation was discovered, Reátegui managed to clear himself and went off to Iquitos as a respected businessman. Fushía escaped with Reátegui's woman, Lalita, and spent the rest of his life as a fugitive on the Amazon, hiding from the military guards (like el Sargento) and officials. Earlier he had persuaded Aquilino to leave his village and his job as a water vendor to run a boat selling merchandise in villages (like Santa María) along the Amazon. Aquilino, with his boat, served as the intermediary for Fushía's continued illegal trade. The narrative base for the second subsections of each sequence is Aquilino transporting Fushía to a leper colony.

Another character with important connections through much of the narrative is don Anselmo, the founder of the original Casa Verde in the desert near Piura. It is implicit that the bar/brothel was funded by some of the wealthy and powerful landowners of the area. It was eventually burned down by Father García and some townspeople, but a generation later another bar/brothel was started by don Anselmo's daughter, Chunga, in a run-down section of Piura's outskirts. Don Anselmo spent the rest of his life as the harpist at Chunga's, the second Green House and the hangout for Lituma, the Mangaches, and Bonifacia (la Selvática).

More connections are revealed through Adrián Nieves (pilot/captain). Nieves deserted the military at some point and was harbored by Fushía and Lalita at their remote island hideout. Later, with the deterioration of Fushía's health, Nieves ran off with Lalita. He was eventually arrested for deserting the military and for collaborating with fugitives. By the time he was released, Lalita had gone off with el Pesado, one of the guards.

Another important narrative link is Jum, the presumed father of Bonifacia, who spends his life without success fighting the military, the government officials, and the businessmen for a fair trade agreement. It is Jum who intuits the very important link between these activities and the "limagovernment".

By thus tracing the characters, reordering their interactions and the essential activities of their lives, we seem to discover the "logic" of the story. The narrative voice has forced us as readers to follow the disjointed time and geographical sequences in which the characters move, to discover the links, and finally to reorder the actions until they fit our chronological understanding of reality.

But an understanding of the content alone is only part of the total narrative importance. As readers responsible to all the elements of the work, we must return to the narrative structure to re-examine the content in the terms in which it was presented—in effect, to examine the other logic which guides the narrative.

In terms of the structure (four major chapters and an epilogue), the most essential narrative links are not in the chapters' subsections but in the preliminary sections which precede them. These sections present an omniscient account of the institutions, agents, and activities of the national power structure—the military, businessmen, political officials, and nuns. In fact, the preliminary sections, by their omniscient attitude and by their location in the structure serve to establish the context for all the characters and actions of the following subsections. Bonifacia, Fushía, don Aquilino, and the other characters of the subsections, in spite of providing the essential human interests of the story, are not, in structural terms, the essential links to the story's dynamic.

As further evidence of the diminished importance of the characters, the fragmented structure of the sections that follow produces an image of a reality in which the characters seem pathetic in the context of their disoriented and inconsistent actions. This is true in terms of their relationships to each other—consider Bonifacia pleading with the nuns to forgive her after helping the two young indigenous females escape from the mission. Her courageous attitude of sympathy for their cultural integrity, ten narrative fragments later, is rendered pathetic. It is true also in terms of their relationship to the socio-economic structure. All of the characters are striving for some degree of social mobility; but, for example, Fushía's alliance with governor-businessman, Julio Reátegui, results in a life as fugitive, trapped in the jungle and victimized by its diseases. We first see him ill and helpless, being transported to a leper colony; and it is only through disjointed flashbacks that we glimpse his former tough image—now pathetic in contrast. The pathetic treatment of the characters also obtains in their relationships to the institutions. Lituma's

brief hope for social mobility through the military (as Sergeant) ended when he killed an important landowner and subsequently spent ten years in prison. We first see him as el Sargento capturing indigenous children and next as Lituma returning to Mangachería from prison. His identity is immediately seen as insecure, and in the context of this indignity all his intermediate actions will be seen as inconsequential. With all their actions (and sometimes their identities) presented out of sequence, any sense of logic or self-determination to their lives is destroyed.

This image is produced and maintained in the narrative by the structure—the omniscient preliminary sections which frame the narrative fragments. But the characters operating within the fragmented structure are kept from understanding the connections between their actions (or their failures) and this larger framework. Their actions are not permitted the consistency that might lead them to see the origin of their determinisms which, in terms of the narrative content, are directed from the organization of State institutions acting in the preliminary sections. A structural metaphor for this image is the anonymity of the narrative voice which controls all their actions and conversations and which thus imitates the abstraction of the State power structure. Each character has some sense of an "enemy" who prevents his or her success; but, with the exception of Jum, each character projects this enmity onto another immediate character instead of onto the real agents.

Furthermore, the characters have no way to understand the relationship between the jungle, the Amazon, Santa María, Iquitos, Piura, Lima, and the world outside—a relationship that is ultimately revealed with clarity to the reader. The narrative referential clues to times and space through the characters and their actions show us that there has been a definite relationship between the activities in Santa María and the Amazon area and the activities in Piura. The continual structural interplay of times, places, and characters reinforces this connection; and when it is prefaced in each chapter by the singularly motivated activity of State organizations we cannot ignore the connection between these remote areas—both the activities and the lives involved—and the referential clues to the central government in Lima, to the market outside Peru, the World Wars, and Peru's political history and economic development.

In this context we see that in the structure and the narrative voice lies the key to the story's essential logic, but we have been led to an understanding of a reality and a logic different from our expectation. We discovered that our pre-conception does not correspond to the reality and logic in which the characters are made to act. The logic of *La Casa Verde* is obscure to the reader as it certainly is to the characters, but nevertheless it is the logic that controls the characters' reality and that directs our understanding of it (or our confusion). But, even though the

course of our discoveries has been entirely at the discretion of an omniscient and anonymous narrative voice which has kept us at a distance and denied us any independent participation with the characters, we have had the advantage of that distance to see that the narrative structure of *La Casa Verde*, in its obscurity, is a metaphor for the actual—for Peru and its internal dynamic.

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